

Melanistic Variation

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by [sunryder](#)

Summary

Will had long since stopped asking himself what the Center's reaction to him would've been if he'd been a Sentinel because Guide Graham, he had a long history of disturbing the hell out of the Sentinels who considered themselves in charge of him, and they took Hobbs' death as proof that something about Will was fundamentally broken.

What Chilton wanted to know – what they all wanted to know – was whether Will had snuffed out Garret Jacob Hobbs because the man was a monster, or because Will was.

Chapter 1

It was tricky for Will to hold on to the mental image of his river while his psychiatrist of the moment kept prattling on, deliberately trying to interrupt him. Will could feel the water's cold seeping through his waders, and the breeze scrubbing across his face as it followed the river like a path. Together they carried his worries out to sea and out of his mind, leaving him with the steady metronome of his fishing: flick the rod, cast downstream, reel the string. Flick, cast, reel. He tilted his face up to the weak heat of the early spring sun and if he stayed like that long enough he just might be able to feel its heat.

Which of course, was the moment that the slick, over-enunciated voice of his latest therapist chose to interrupt. "Are you listening to me, Mr. Graham?" In his mind's eye, Will could see the man glowering at him from the riverbank – Frederick Chilton. Off-the-rack suit meant to look tailored, but too broad in the shoulders. (Not because of the store clerk being unable to fit him properly, but because Chilton had an over-inflated sense of his own strength.) Loud shirt and mismatched tie that he believes makes him look fashionable but is just another attempt to steal the attention from people that he couldn't command with his personality. He was tapping his foot against a rock like he expected to cause the same menacing click that came when he strode down the hallways of his asylum.

Chilton imagined that the Center had called him in as one of the last to interview Will because he was some kind of heavy hitter. He believed they didn't want to spook Will by bringing in the man who would oversee his confinement if they found him a danger to society. (Not that any Guide in the US would be forced into an institution for the criminally insane. A hundred different S/G organizations would lodge their objections since it was basic biology – or what passed for biology when it came to how Guides functioned – that putting a Guide with the worst of the worst would just drive them insane. (A punishment declared cruel and unusual by the 9th Circuit Court in 1954.)

Really, Chilton had been summoned because the Center was scraping the bottom of the barrel. There was nothing at all interesting about Chilton's interview technique. He was too used to dealing with patients who were drugged to the gills or were willing to say something to Chilton because there was no one else to talk to. At least three other psychiatrists had tried to rile Will by calling him "Mister" rather than "Guide" or "Special Agent," and Chilton couldn't manage the scornful tone that the others had naturally.

Unlike Chilton, Will knew damn well what it meant that The Center's Director had started to bring in therapists with not a shred of Sentinel or Guide experience and that meaning only got worse when they transitioned to someone with a specialization – however tenuous – in criminals.

What Chilton wanted to know – what they all wanted to know – was whether Will had snuffed out Garret Jacob Hobbs because the man was a monster, or because Will was.

The twisted part of Will could appreciate the irony that he'd put Hobbs down like the abomination he was, but the Center was too busy losing their minds to see the cannibalistic

serial killer part of that killing.

Will had long since stopped asking himself what the Center's reaction to him would've been if he'd been a Sentinel. It didn't do a thing except make him furious to think that Sentinel Graham would've been getting a medal and a promotion up the Center hierarchy while half a dozen Guides 'stumbled' across his bedroom. Guide Graham, though, he had a long history of disturbing the hell out of the Sentinels who considered themselves in charge of him, and they took Hobbs' death as proof that something about Will was fundamentally broken. (Again with the irony, this would lead to half a dozen Sentinels trying to infringe on Will's mental space and convince him that they were the lynchpin to Will's sanity.)

Will was self-aware enough to admit that he'd gone into something like shock after he killed Hobbs. Common sense told him that he must have kept it together long enough to get Mrs. Hobbs and her daughter away from the kitchen, to tell backup it was clear, and to wipe the blood spatter off his face so the women wouldn't have to see the last speckles of their loved one dripping from his skin. But the first clear memory Will had after stepping out of his car and looking Hobbs in the eye was of being bundled out of the local FBI field office and onto one of the Center's planes. He probably should've pitched a fit about being taken into custody, but he was so tired that he didn't much care where they took him so long as he got some sleep.

That had been two days ago, and Will had come to regret that momentary apathy. He was supposed to be teaching a class right now, and instead he was trapped in one of the Center's secure, long-term suites designed to function as a shield for Guides who'd lost complete control. The Guides put in here either weren't expected to ever leave again, or at least not leave without a massive overhaul of their mental state. Will had held onto hope for a whole twenty minutes after he'd woken in the Center wrapped up in clothes that weren't his own, but Alana Bloom had been the first in the parade of Center-affiliated psychiatrists who'd come through the room to check on Will's mental state. He'd taken one look at her and known that Jack Crawford wasn't out in the hallway fighting for him and that no one was listening to a damn word Alana said because she wasn't one of their own. It must have taken all of her considerable persuasive abilities to be allowed in to see him at all, and even then all she'd been able to do was promise to take care of his dogs.

(At least, those were her words. Will didn't need a tenth of his empathy to see the protective fury in her eyes and know that she'd burn every bridge she had with the FBI and the Center to get Will out of this mentally and emotionally unharmed. And since her marriage to Margot, the head of the Verger Empire, Alana had a hell of a lot of bridges to burn and enough gasoline to do it.)

Alana had kissed his forehead and run her fingers through his hair – exactly what she did to her son when he woke up with nightmares – before she left him to endure a string of in-house psychiatrists from the Alexandria Center (colloquially called the Quantico Center), and then from the Baltimore and Mid-Atlantic Centers, to mundanes from within driving distance of Baltimore, to hacks from the Southern States Center that Will had been ignoring since he packed up and left at eighteen. He'd been expecting psychiatrists from the various D.C. Centers, but the appearance of some of the shrinks who'd haunted Will's childhood nightmares had triggered and his campaign of silence, which had then plunged them to the

bottom of the barrel and Frederick Chilton. (It said something about how inclined the Center was to actually help Will that the director went to a mundane rather than a psychiatrist from a Center that might upstage him. That certainty might have contributed to Will's silence.)

The common thread among the psychiatrists Will actually bothered to listen to was that there was no way a healthy Guide would be able to kill someone. Even with another life on the line, like Mrs. and Abigail Hobbs' had been, Will Graham should've been incapable of killing the serial killer, let alone reaching out with his empathy and snuffing out the man's life like anyone else would a birthday candle. (About half of them had mentioned Will's own stabbing as a beat cop in New Orleans as an example of what they considered fact. Obviously, something had to be wrong with Will if he had a different response this time. When the last one had pulled out that argument, Will had put on his lecturer's voice and explained the concept of mitigating circumstances in such a condescending tone that the man had stormed out in a fury that Will could feel in the air even after the door closed behind him.)

Now Frederick Chilton, who elevated the craft of psychiatry to new and impressive levels of idiocy, kept interrupting Will's attempts to mentally fish his way through this nonsense. To be honest, Will was tempted to use his empathy to verbally rip the man open just to get some peace and quiet. Chilton's prattling kept scaring away his mental fish.

But then, there was a new voice. A psychiatrist's that, despite Will's studied avoidance of mental health professionals, he didn't recognize.

Her voice was thick and heavy with European vowels, and the slow cadence to her speech that so many therapists tried to imitate because they thought it made them sound portentous. Will opened his eyes to see Chilton fumbling over himself to declare how honored he was to meet her, what a privilege it was, he'd read her last article in the European Journal of Psychiatric Medicine and it was inspired. She endured his fussing with a polite sort of ambivalence that just made Chilton try harder.

Will was ready to ignore them both until someone from the Center managed to clear Chilton out of the room – so polished a woman couldn't be expected to do it herself. Then Will would do her the courtesy of at least listening to her introductory speech before he went back to his stream, he'd probably do even more considering he still possessed some of his southern manners. But the woman flicked a glance over Chilton's shoulder, and with the barest twitch of her eyebrow Will knew she'd wanted to roll her eyes, and she wanted him to know it.

All right, he'd let this woman have more than just her introduction. The flare of teasing and personality was no doubt deliberate, but Will appreciated the change of pace. She managed to get Chilton out of the room so deftly that Will mentally told himself he'd answer two of her questions in exchange for the break from the norm.

She settled into her chair – no notebook so Will wouldn't feel more like a science experiment than he already did, a pressed pantsuit that held its sharp lines because of the quality of the fabric rather than her own fussiness, and hair pulled up in a bun that aligned with the sharp angle of her cheekbones to make them look even more like they could cut glass. She didn't waste time with silent staring in a cheap attempt to control their meeting. (Unlike most, she

had enough certainty in her skill that she didn't need to try and take what little control Will had in his cage.)

"My name is Doctor Mischa Lecter. Under normal circumstances I would prefer you call me Dr. Lecter, but since you are not my patient and this is an informal setting I believe Mischa would be appropriate. What would you like to be called?"

Well, that wasn't subtle at all. Or maybe it was subtle and Will had just seen too many psychiatrists in the last three days to be able to tell anymore. "Will."

"Will, then. Alana Bloom has asked me to make sure you know she is taking good care of your dogs. Though she says Winston has been glowering at her since she picked them up. Apparently, he has remained by the front door since he arrived at their home and refuses to move, despite young Morgan's best efforts."

Will snorted. "I'd like to say she's exaggerating, but if any dog could manage to like being stuck in my house all day instead of free in Alana's mansion, it would be Winston. Tell her that Winston will move if he thinks he's been replaced as Morgan's favorite. I don't think Morgan has it in him to pretend that, though." Mischa had just gotten more out of Will than anyone else in the last 24 hours. He sighed, because he ought to be playing harder to get, but in his mind's eye, he could perfectly see little Morgan next to Winston, curled up and reading a book on a chair someone had hauled into the foyer so the little master wouldn't have to sit on the floor.

"I imagine the other psychiatrists advised you to hold on to that piece of information and use it to bargain something useful out of me. Since this is an informal meeting and all."

Mischa gave him a polite nod of confirmation. "Informal doesn't mean I've gone from a therapist to an interrogator."

"I doubt anyone's major concern here is my mental wellbeing."

"You'd be a fool to believe in their good will. To most, you're a fascinating case study, a thing never before seen and always believed impossible. Be aware, the ones here for scientific curiosity are the most altruistic. In my short time here I overheard more than few Sentinels discussing how wonderful you'll be for their careers when the Center makes you bond as a result of this latest difficulty."

It wasn't anything Will hadn't heard before. A forced bonding had terrified him when he'd been a teenager in the deep south, but now that he was fully grown he knew forced bonds were difficult to incite in most cases, and outright impossible when you dealt with a Guide of his strength. He might be losing his mind, but if anything, the last few days should tell that that didn't matter one bit to his Guide gifts. "And you? Why should I think you're here to help me?"

"Because they consider us both broken things and enjoy proving them wrong."

The niggling at the back of his mind lit up like a match catching on the first piece of kindling. "You're dormant."

“Most people assume latent.”

“Latency feels differently.”

“One makes you uncomfortable, and the other does not?” Mischa summarized with all the skill and detachment of a woman who’d boiled down a core facet of her personality for nosy people a hundred times before.

Will snorted. “We both know that’s a gross oversimplification that our community indulges in because we like to pretend that being Gifted means we’re spared the same mental and social issues as everyone else. We lie to ourselves and say that what makes a Sentinel or Guide go dormant is when they violate our established Anglo-European construct of ‘protecting the tribe.’”

“You believe it’s more complicated than that?”

“Anyone with sense knows it’s more complicated than that. Nazi Germany had SS Sentinel teams hunting for hidden Jews because they believed they were traitors to the nation and needed to be rounded up for the good of the tribe. The head of the pride I was born into in Louisiana also belonged to the KKK and lamented how he wasn’t allowed to lynch black Sentinels anymore because they were a stain upon our community. In training we like to warn young Sentinels about Helen of Troy and – depending on the misogyny of the teacher – claim that Helen either seduced Paris with her gifts, or Paris ran off with a Guide that wasn’t his own, or she was his own and he didn’t bother fighting for her, or he was too lackluster a Sentinel to deserve her because he was such a terrible fighter. But no one mentions that cultural historians believe that Hector was a Sentinel too, as was Achilles, and Odysseus was more than likely a Guide. It’s one of the fundamental stories that we use to discuss the perils of false bonding and what it means to be a Sentinel, and we ignore the reality that they’re all fighting on different sides, and for different causes.”

“Achilles for fame, and Hector for home. I read your rather scathing rebuttal to Hargrave’s work.”

Will blushed, he was always surprised when someone had actually read something of his, though he knew pretty much everything he wrote turned out to be one of the essential readings of either Gifted studies or profiling – or in a few cases, both. “Yes, well. Then you know what I mean.”

“And if I disagreed with you?”

“You don’t. People who believe there’s something fundamentally wrong with them are the ones who feel wrong to other Gifted. We’ve taught dormant Sentinels and Guides that they’re that way because they’re defective, and they reek of that belief in their own deficiency. They feel out of place in their own skin and that travels. You’re dormant, but you don’t have that stain on your self-perception. Also, people who believe they’re deficient don’t tend to waltz into a Center and defy the orders handed down to them from the local Alpha.”

Her smile was far more subtle than the sunset red of her lipstick. “How did you know he’s the one who lectured me about proper handling of Will Graham?”

“Because it was either him or Jack Crawford, and my boss thinks he’s the only one who can handle me and it’s a skill that can’t be taught.”

“That must be frustrating.”

“No more so than everyone believing you’re broken beyond repair because they refuse to acknowledge reality because it’s complicated.”

“And what is this reality that they’re failing to see?”

If Mischa had bothered to listening to the Alpha Sentinel she would’ve learned that Rule Number One when dealing with Will Graham was never, ever dare him to prove what he could do. If you disagreed with what he saw, you did it politely. Otherwise things like, “That you chose to turn off your gift, not that it was stripped from you,” came out of his mouth.

Will imagined that what made Dr. Lecter so good at her job was that poker face. Not a muscle twitched in her expression, but that stillness was sign enough that she was trying to regroup from a knowledge she hadn’t expected Will to have. A better man would have let that be enough, but Will was bored, and he was irritated at himself for agreeing to talk quite as long as he had when he could be mentally fishing yet again.

And, Will had never been accused of being a better man.

“It was something terrible. Something that every psychiatrist who treated you afterward believed had forced you offline. That’s why you became one, because none of them believed you when you told them the truth and you wanted to make sure that it never happened to anyone else ever again.

“No, wait. Nothing so altruistic. You thought they were all idiots and you could do better. Helping other people is just a fringe benefit but not your motive. You like the difficult cases because they mean that the idiots who misdiagnosed you now have to come to you for help, and every time that happens it’s like they’re affirming how right you were all along. Every time it just makes you all the more sure that you were right to turn off your gift. That no matter what they say, it was enough for you to survive. You don’t need to be a Guide to be better than any of them ever could be. Who needs empathy when you can just be smarter than everyone else?

“So you leave your gift turned off, even though you know you could turn it back on at any time. Even though it gnaws at you, begging to be let out, pleading with you to listen to it, telling you that there’s an essential part of you, the core of you, that you’re leaving locked up in a cage. All because you think you’re strong enough without it. You’re good enough without it. But no matter how many times they come to you for help, no matter how many times you tell yourself that you’re so far ahead of them that your gift doesn’t mean a thing, you’re terrified that if you took your gift back then you’d be nothing more than a mediocre Guide, and you’d rather be a spectacular dormant than a mediocre anything.”

Will could see the tension and release in Mischa’s jaw as she swallowed back the instinctive urge to tell him to fuck off and storm out of the room. (It was an urge Will was intimately

familiar with, from both sides of the fuck off.) “I should have believed Alana when she warned me about you.”

“Alana’s warnings tend to be pretty accurate, though they’re more gentle with me than they need to be. She thinks I’m a wilting flower.”

“No, I’d say she believes she has to look after you since you won’t do it yourself.”

The words, for all they’d been said to Will a hundred times before, were biting. There were a dozen things about his life that ought to make Will feel like he wasn’t properly protecting himself, but she wasn’t talking about any of them. She meant that Will wasn’t doing enough to protect himself from her. You didn’t hunt serial killers for a living without accepting that everyone was always more dangerous than they appeared, but Will gave no ground. He’d proven in the last few days that he was more dangerous than he looked too.

“Could you tell me what happened to make me choose to go offline?” Mischa asked, with a studied and unbelievable air of nonchalance. He made her uncomfortable, and she was tempted to unsettle him right back.

“Yes. But you don’t really want me to. You don’t like me well enough to want me to have that information.”

“Oh, William. Liking has nothing to do with it. I’m sure I’ll like you well enough in time. But right now...”

“I scare the shit out of you.”

“Yes. But not for the reason you imagine.”

Will snorted. “Not because I plucked out your secret, but because I might kill you if I lose my temper?” Mischa could almost taste the scorn on his words.

“Not that either. But I’m a grown woman, Will. I’ll process my fears and deal with them like an adult, just like the Center will have to.”

“You’re going to go out there and make the argument that it’s my problem, not theirs? And you honestly believe that’s going to fly?”

“No, I don’t. But given their poor record in dealing with you, I imagine they’ll have very little say in the matter when I inform the Sentinel/Guide International Oversight Committee of my concerns.”

Will had spent their conversation lounging in his chair, looking half asleep and ready to slink back into whatever mental space he’d been occupying for the last three therapists who’d bothered to question him. Nothing about his body had changed as he’d been peeling back the layers of Mischa’s own psyche, but there’d been a light in his eyes like something was actually engaged. Silly her, she’d assumed that was the most engagement one ever got out of William Graham. He didn’t sit up, he didn’t tense his muscles, he still sprawled back in his chair so indolently that Mischa could almost see his tail wagging behind him. But his eyes,

Mischa wondered if Hobbs had lived long enough to feel the power of those eyes searing through him before he died.

“And what will their response be?”

The words were calm, and yet somehow sarcastic enough that virtually everyone in the hall would have snapped back something unpardonable if they’d heard. And yet, Mischa felt like every thread in her body had drawn tight like the string of a violin ready to be plucked. Yes, Will Graham was far more dangerous than even the people trying to cage him for murder had any idea.

“Whatever the hell I want it to be.”

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Her cell rang twice before he picked up. “Mischa.”

It was a relief to hear her name in Hannibal’s Lithuanian tones. Try as most Europeans did to say her name properly, the true pronunciation was simply beyond their ability. To hear her name spoken as it ought to be was always a joy, nearly as great a pleasure as speaking with her brother.

“Mischa?”

“You need to come to Baltimore.”

“Are you well?” Hannibal demanded.

“No, but I will be.”

“What happened?”

“My injuries are emotional, Hannibal, not physical.”

“That does not make me less likely to seek retribution against the one who hurt you.”

“You won’t seek retribution, brother. That’s precisely the reason that I’m hurting.”

“Mish—”

“I found your Guide.”

Chapter 2

Per protocol, the Paris Centre's travel secretary logged a flight from the Centre's private airstrip. In an attempt to make conversation with a co-worker they fancied, the intern who logged the flight asked their companion where they thought the name Adrasteia was from? "Because really, who would name their kid that?"

"It's not a real name, Avery. It's fake so people like us can't sell the information for a tip off."

"Buy why would the Sentinel Centre need to send someone out with a fake name?"

While the fancied co-worker didn't much care, Avery's curiosity was piqued. After some googling—

("It means 'the inescapable.'")

"And what does that mean?"

"You don't know what inescapable means?"

"Of course, I know what the word means, Avery! I meant, why would someone use that name?"

"Well, Wikipedia says it's another name for Nemesis, the Greek goddess of retribution. If that's any help.")

—both the employees considered the name justifiable cause to call their boss, just in case.

That boss knew someone at the Washington Dulles International Airport, who knew someone at the New York City Sentinel Center, who knew someone at the Baltimore Center, who wasted an hour summoning up the courage to mention this name to their supervisor. That supervisor then proved themselves entirely worthy of the fear their subordinates had for them and waited three hours to mention the incident to a peer in the midst of a jumble of complaints about the inept young things they had on their staff. The peer had the luck to ask for the assumed name they interns were so worried about, and despite the supervisor bungling the pronunciation entirely, the woman had the sense to recognize that a Sentinel being flown in from the Paris Center under an assumed name was something that someone in a position of real authority ought to know about. And so the pseudonym got passed up the chain, again and again, no one recognizing the name, but enough people realizing it was a matter that ought to be examined.

It was a twist of luck and fate that had a well-informed Council secretary stumbling past someone asking if they'd ever heard the name Adrasteia before, and the secretary's panic was enough that every Guide in the hall stuttered to a stop, looking frantically around for the threat deserving of such emotion.

This was how, despite a college student in France knowing twenty minutes before the plane took off, Baltimore didn't know an Alpha Sentinel Prime and primary Council Assassin was due to arrive until two hours before he landed.

Will Graham found out about this fifteen minutes after the realization when Supervisory Special Agent Jack Crawford came bursting through the suite door with the Center Director, Issac Hart, hard on his heels.

"You can't do this Jack!" Isaac shouted.

Jack ignored him. "Get your shit together, Will. We're getting you out of here."

Will set his mug down on top of the book he'd been reading ever since Mischa left him in blissful privacy. (Will didn't know if they'd run out of psychiatrists, or if the others just lacked the guts to try after he picked apart her brain.) "Why do I feel like I shouldn't be excited about this?"

"Because you're not going anywhere!"

Jack, master of the dramatic pause, glowered back at Isaac just long enough that anyone who wasn't inured to Jack's dramatics would start to panic. Of course, when Jack declared, "They've put The Ripper on a plane," Will felt like he deserved that one for getting too happy with his quiet.

Isaac snapped at Jack for using the derogatory nickname that everyone used for the International Council's favorite Assassin – everyone meaning those few people knew and/or believed that the Council had a list of Assassins they liked to call upon to deal with those Sentinels who went too far beyond the bounds of morality. Sometimes Sentinels went feral, sometimes they were just sick bastards who went on the run, and sometimes the Sentinels the Assassins hunted were dormant for the reasons that gave the term dormant its bad reputation.

Occasionally – though far more often than anyone liked to admit – the Assassins were called upon to hunt serial killers when the traditional police and the Sentinels who worked with them were unable to do the job. (The Council Assassins had first started working with law enforcement in the States back in the late '40s when a serial killer had targeted Sentinels who'd served in WWII. The Assassins had gradually shifted from hunting those who hunted Sentinels and Guides, to their current, clandestine, and terrifying mandate.)

Will had worked with an Assassin on one of his first cases consulting with the FBI. They'd been together just long enough for him to lay out his profile for the elderly woman, accept her deep bow and dignified, "Thank you, young Guide." He never saw her again, but she sent him a puppy in thanks for his advice. Even after he'd unofficially retired from any dealings with the FBI, Will occasionally got a call to the Center to consult on one of the Assassin's cases when they were dissatisfied with the work of their own profilers. Thus far he'd worked with The Lady, The Butcher, The Hunter, The Fang, and The Widow, though he'd only called two of them by their derogatory nicknames, and only The Lady had given him a puppy. Each of them had code names that the Council used, safely guarding the names they went by out in the real world to protect them against the retribution, both from outside their own community and from within.

Based on how comfortable the Sentinels Assassins were – the good ones were comfortable both with their code names and the slurs – Will imagined that the codes had to be fairly permanent, rather than new for every assignment. Though he had never heard of an Assassin called Adrasteia before.

He'd heard of The Ripper, of course. It was impossible to deal with serial killers and not have heard of him. He was particularly... punitive with his kills. And that was the most polite way of putting it.

If you were going to be accurate you'd say that if The Ripper didn't have the Council's sanction they'd be calling him a serial killer too. No one who dressed up their kills in such a way could ever be considered mentally healthy, and while the Council liked to say they had a leash on all their Assassins, common sense said that at least a few of those kills had to be done without the Council's knowledge or permission, they just pretended to grant it after the fact because they didn't want to lose any of their tools for intimidation.

Will let Jack and Isaac have it out, each of them ranting about whether Will ought to stay or go, tossing about their presence against one another like sheer machismo would win the day rather than a sound argument. Under normal circumstances, Will would've been annoyed that the two big bad Sentinels were arguing with one another rather than asking Will for his opinion, but today he appreciated the chance to mull over everything he knew about Assassins rather than actually defending himself.

What little he knew about the Ripper made the man sound fucking terrifying, and if his preferred medium hadn't been bloodshed Will would have called him an artistic genius. The Council called on the Ripper to do their hunting when they had a point to make, because nothing made the Council's fury with someone quite so clear as peeling open someone's rib cage and turning their chest cavity into a flower vase. (According to one of the forensics techs, the flowers had been expertly arranged.)

Jack had been horrified that a "murdering psychopath who cast all Sentinels with the same uncontrollable, feral brush" was allowed to not only run around but also was the weapon their leadership chose to use. While Jack railed, Will had been forced to tamp down hard on his amusement. Not just at Jack losing his temper at a serial killer's body being turned into a planter, but because the corpse in question had been disposing of his victims in the local park. Will could appreciate a twisted sense of humor in an Assassin. (He thought Jack just ought to be grateful that the killer hadn't been dumping his bodies in a children's park, otherwise his death and dismemberment would have been far more gruesome. The Ripper had gotten his nickname after he'd spread the pieces of a child rapist around St. Mark's Square.)

"Will! Let's go!" Apparently, Will had been zoned out a little too long, and Jack grabbed him by the arm to haul him to his feet. Isaac grabbed Jack in turn, wrenching him away from Will for daring to touch a Guide without permission.

"He can't just leave! You're being ridiculous! The Council isn't going to send anyone to kill him. You can't just drag him away from the Center in the middle of an investigation into his conduct!"

"He didn't do anything wrong!"

“He killed someone, Jack! When one of your agents kills someone in the line of duty, you investigate the circumstances and verify that the agents themselves are all right. This is no different than what you would have done to Guide Graham if he was a traditional agent, you’re just pissed that we’re putting him through Guide counseling rather than the FBI’s!”

The twist of fury Will could feel from Jack was answer enough to that question, even if years of emotional extortion hadn’t told him everything he needed to know about Jack’s motivations. (Jack was blind and furious justice, no room for the empathy that tended to be a Guide’s bread and butter.) “Will’s not here for counseling, he’s here because you think he needs to be put down!”

Will would probably be more irritated about that assumption if it wasn’t absolutely true. Guides weren’t supposed to work in law enforcement without a Sentinel, and they absolutely weren’t supposed to hunt down serial killers. That was the province of Sentinels, and even then just those Sentinels who were a bit closer to their own animal side than the rest of the Sentinel/Guide community liked to admit was possible. (And he’d be irritated by that implication if he didn’t prefer dogs to most humans.)

“If the Ripper is here to kill me, Jack, he’s going to kill me. If he wants me dead I’m going to be dead, and it doesn’t matter how far or how fast I run. I’m already dead.”

“I won’t let him kill you, Will.” Jack sounded so sure of himself, so selfless and determined to keep Will from all the world’s harm. There was a certain empathetic comfort that came from a powerful Sentinel pledging himself to your defense. It was the kind of thing that made up the old stories and spoke the most ancient part of anyone’s psyche. The Sentinel was supposed to protect the tribe, and when they spoke like that, their voice echoing in your bones with all the promise that they were designed to do what their people had been doing since man’s first inception, and you were supposed to believe they would protect you.

But like with the distinction between dormant and latent, and Sentinels always occupying opposing sides of a war, they didn’t think too much about what it might mean to protect the tribe. Every inch of Jack’s being swore he would protect Will from the Ripper, the Council, and everyone else who might bring him to harm, but there was a catch. Jack would protect Will, not because they were friends or because he deserved it, but because Will was a valuable piece in Jack’s personal fight against all the world’s evils. Without Will, Jack would be crippled in his serial killer hunts, and he didn’t give a flying fuck what happened to Will in the pursuit of that dream.

Will had always known his value to Jack was hinged on how well he could help him save the world, but Will had never particularly minded before. They were catching killers, and if Will could do that good, he didn’t mind doing it with Jack. (Yes, Will realized his own hypocrisy in his loyalty to Jack being just as circumstantial as Jack’s loyalty to him. Since he was the one being exploited, Will didn’t judge himself too harshly.)

But today, the cold reality of his relationship with Jack grated along his senses. Jack was urging him to run when deep inside they both knew that despite all his protests about the horror of the Council Assassins, and the Ripper in particular, Jack would turn Will over to them in a heartbeat if it meant getting a better deal. Will liked to think that turning him over to the Council would be worth a lifetime supply of Assassins at Jack’s beck and call, but in

truth, Jack would probably turn him over at the first sign of a case taking a bit too long for his liking. The reality of Jack's motives contrasted so sharply with the strength he was projecting that Will felt a headache bubble up under the emotional whiplash.

It was the pounding of his head that told Will he'd been delving into Jack's mind, unconsciously dipping in and out between his thoughts, picking up on the harsh calculations going on behind that steady promise. Jack had a hundred possibilities laid out in his mind for exactly what he'd want in exchange for access to William Graham.

Will slumped back in his chair, slowly winding his mind back to himself before Jack noticed that he'd been plundered and killed Will himself. But that didn't mean Will was going to go along quietly, or at all. "What do you think is going to happen to all those agents you'll try to hide me behind, Jack?"

"Not even the Ripper—"

"What about when I go home? Or out to a crime scene? Or venture past one of the FBI's windows? If the Ripper wants me dead he'll find a way to kill me. Though putting my own nihilism aside, I agree with Isaac. I'm not the Ripper's usual fare."

"You killed someone with your gifts, Will!"

"That's why he needs to stay here! So we can monitor him!" And the two were off again. Will wondered if he could keep the two of them arguing long enough that the Ripper would be here either way.

"Shut the fuck up, the both of you!" Will had to pause a moment to make sure the words hadn't spilled from his own lips. He didn't think he was quite that angry – more melancholy and growing more bitter with each passing second – but angry, not really. It took Will a moment to register that boiling, furious presence of the Alpha of Washington DC standing in the doorway, his guide silent and seemingly unmoved behind his right shoulder. "The both of you are throwing off enough rage that I'm surprised everyone in the whole damn building isn't lined up outside to see the show!"

Despite his own bravado, even Jack flinched. The Alpha and his Guide were a perfect match for one another, and for Washington as far as Will was concerned. The Alpha had made a name for himself bursting through doors and throwing his literal and psionic weight around in a way that only a combat trained Sentinel could. His Guide was so slight a woman that you thought a breeze might blow her away, and as a result, everyone ignored how well she could slip between the cracks of your mind and walk away with every scrap of information she wanted. Most politicians were too busy trying to out-Alpha the Sentinel to notice they were being plundered by the plain woman they all thought was beneath their notice.

Will however, Will always noticed. Not because he was a better guide – she was good enough at what she did that even Will could barely feel her working unless it was inside the confines of his own mind. No, Will knew what it was to be considered too plain to be worthy of any notice. They both used it to their advantage.

Now, while the Sentinels were busy growling at one another like a pack of rabid dogs, she and Will stared at one another over the breadth of the room. She said not a single word, but Will could feel her brewing like a storm cloud on the horizon, waiting for the least provocation.

Will shored up his shields, not caring at all what she thought of him for that instinctual response, and sorted out a part of his brain to actually listen to the argument going on around him.

“I don’t give a flying fuck what you want, Crawford! Graham is in the custody of the Center and he’s going to stay right here until he’s deemed safe enough to leave! And if the fucking Ripper says he needs to be put down, then he’s going to get put down!” Politics meant that any Alpha over Washington DC would have only the most tenuous of grasps on the constantly fluctuating pride, and if they wanted to hold onto their position they’d have to fight tooth and nail to keep it.

Plain and simple: the Alpha didn’t want to be ousted over a Guide he considered an abomination in the first place.

“Did the Council tell you they were sending someone to have me put down? Or did you find out when the gossip made the rounds just like everyone else?” That one did come out of Will’s mouth. And the vein in the Alpha’s forehead bulged like Will thought only happened in cartoon characters. His Guide whipped out and struck him flat palmed across his mind, and Will’s head snapped back at the force of the blow. Will might have accepted the punishment if the Alpha hadn’t smirked at him like Will deserved to be put in his place, but now, it was on.

Rather than striking back – a stupid move when the Alpha was more than willing to snap Will’s neck and do the Ripper’s job for him – Will sunk back into the recesses of his mind. There wasn’t a damn thing the Alpha could do to Will inside of his own head, and the second one of them tried to touch his body to move him where they’d prefer, they’d find themselves swallowed in the cold, darkness of Will’s mind at peace.

He went back to his mental stream where he would usually sort through his thoughts and feelings, reeling them up from the depths of the water, inspecting them in the guise of fish, and then tossing them back when he understood them well enough. But when he wanted safety from the barrage of thoughts and emotions around him, Will dropped his pole, shucked off his waders, and sunk back into the water beneath him.

The river dissolved around Will into the wide, smooth nothingness of the gulf. The water was still like glass, but dark enough to hide the monsters lurking under the surface. Will let himself sink down, cocooned in the water and all its silence and safety. After all, Will couldn’t drown inside his own head. Anyone who touched him would get dragged into the water, and if the Alpha’s guide came after him, the creatures slithering past Will’s skin would find her a tasty treat to hunt.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being so patient for this next edit while I got things for work all done. For those of you asking, I have no intentions of continuing the story at this time. I'm not against writing more, but I'm afraid that I have no idea what the plot for it would be.

Thank you all of your for being such wonderful readers and leaving me such amazing comments!

“The Alexandria Centre has realized you’re coming.” Chiyoh didn’t need anything so paltry as words to express her disdain. The network of informants she relied upon treated the entire world the same way servants treated their manor house, and she made it a point to know anything and everything that might be of interest to herself or to Hannibal. For an entire Centre to be so woefully misinformed and ill connected as to not know immediately that anyone of note – let alone an Assassin – was coming to their city was a breach of intelligence the likes of which she could scarce comprehend.

There were other members of their community who made it their business to know everything about everyone, and they were more than willing to pay Chiyoh in whatever information she sought, both because of the juicy details she brought back from her travels with Hannibal, and their certainty that when they needed it, there was nothing anyone could conceal from Hannibal Lecter.

Despite rumors to the contrary, Hannibal was not one of those rare Alpha Ascendants who possessed not only the senses of a Sentinel, but also all the empathy of a Guide. Hannibal’s knowledge of other human beings came instead from his fierce intellect. The vast majority of people were simple in the extreme, and Hannibal needed little time with them to unravel their wants and intentions. For the most part that knowledge made other people incredibly dull, while those scarce few who he found interesting were friendships he prized. It also meant that he knew full well what a killer deserved for their crimes. There were a few occasions when he had exercised mercy to a killer that the Council wished he had simply cut down – perhaps in a less picturesque way than was his fashion – but Hannibal Lecter’s opinion about the relative guilt or innocence of a criminal was not to be doubted. One didn’t need empathy to know their guilt when one could simply look them in the eye and ask a few questions that told them everything they needed to know.

However, one didn’t even need to be Hannibal Lecter to know that William Graham needed a doctor, not a bullet.

And no, Mischa had offered him no further information about the person she believed to be his Guide before she hung up the phone. All the details came from Chiyoh, including the

assumption that the psionically battered FBI agent currently in the corrupt Centre's care was the person his sister regarded as the other half of his soul.

Hannibal certainly appreciated the aesthetics of the man his sister had chosen – though he would have to be subjected to both a shave and a trim so his curls might actually curl rather than hang heavy and lank around his face. And though the scruff of his beard accentuated his cheekbones, Hannibal rather enjoyed the thought of how angelic the guide would look if he decided to shave. Whether Mischa was right or wrong about the Guide's position in his life, he would certainly be no chore to bed.

Based off the terribly interesting crime he was accused of committing, Hannibal also suspected that Will Graham would be a pleasure to speak with as well, and there were wretchedly few people in the world who met both of those criteria.

Hannibal had spent near a lifetime traveling with Chiyoh, and it was this that had taught him the quality of her silences. Often enough she simply wanted peace to pursue her own endeavors, but this particular silence appeared when she was waiting for Hannibal to catch up. It was rare that Hannibal's vicious mind failed to understand something just as fast as she did, and he doubted this was one of those occasions. No, judging by the tense line of her shoulders, Chiyoh had some tidbit of information she longed to share with him but was impatiently waiting for Hannibal to realize that he had something else to learn.

Were it any other day Hannibal would ask her a question about the weather, just to watch her twitch. (Though occasionally, her twitches turned into punches that let them practice their sparring.) Today though, Hannibal could feel that itch underneath his skin that every Sentinel got when someone spoke to them of their Guide. He refused to label it something so mundane as hope, but he felt restless and hungry in a way that even he could liken unto a child on Christmas morning.

"I doubt they realize I am coming at all."

"The Alexandria Centre is under the impression the Ripper is still on a plane and several hours away from landing."

Hannibal paused in his idle perusal of the street outside and his silent wish that Will Graham had been put into holding in the Baltimore Center – the surrounding neighborhoods were so much enjoyable to wander through. He chose to ignore how he was putting together a mental schedule of all the places he'd like to take William to see while they were deciding whether to stay in the Chesapeake region or return to Hannibal's preferred haunts. "Given the Alexandria Centre's focus on FBI agents and other American officers it seems almost farcical that they wouldn't know the Council has access to planes faster than the norm."

Faster indeed. Hannibal and Chiyoh were a mere few blocks away from the Centre, and apparently, would be descending upon them mere minutes after they had realized they were about to have company. Hannibal stretched out his senses to listen for the ensuing panic, and he imagined that if he were as strong a Guide as he was a Sentinel that he might be able to feel the sick twisting fear that other Guides had told him always accompanied his arrival.

Hannibal would never know if it was simply a twist of fate that had him contemplating his own limited empathy at that moment, or if perhaps the ripple he could feel through the psionic plane was what triggered his thoughts about what it might like to be an empath. No matter which order of events he would eventually decide, it changed nothing that in that moment he felt the world draw tight around him, as though he'd been wrapped in cotton wool. It had been such a creeping thing that Hannibal had failed to notice it coming upon him until the damp chill began seeping into his bones.

Chiyoh would grill him about it later, demanding to know every last detail and Hannibal would confess that he'd been supremely comfortable the whole drive. Chiyoh would grumble that any time Hannibal wasn't filled with disdain about a place should have been a signal to him that something was wrong – a fact he couldn't deny – but he'd been too comfortable to notice that perhaps he ought to not have been.

Later he could parse out that the comfort had grown, like being wrapped in a blanket only to then put on a pair of fuzzy socks, and then have the heat of the fire finally reach you underneath the fabric. Each was wonderful on its own, and the increase in warmth was not something you would complain about.

At least, until the warmth began weighing upon you and you realized that the heat was not coming from the fabric, but from your own poor body trying to fight off the fabric's damp chill. That was the peril with wet clothing, your body could only last so long before water's cold won out. As they approached the Centre, Hannibal felt as though he'd been swaddled in soaking rags and just now come to realize it.

The cold grew worse the closer they came to the building, sinking into his bones and tempting Hannibal to sleep in that horrifying way he remembered from the day his parents died and his Mischa was almost taken from him as they froze. It was the same insouciance his Mischa carried around in the heart of her, the deadness that she deemed necessary to survive after she decided her Gifts were not worth the trouble they brought her. (Make no mistake, Hannibal respected his sister's decision to live precisely as she chose to. For Mischa, that hollowness drove her to heal such wounds in others, while Hannibal could not imagine what horrors he would mete out if he had such an emptiness in him.)

And now, he could feel it forming in another. He could almost feel the gaping maw opening up beneath his feet, an endless depth beneath him of which no amount of swimming might ever reach the bottom. He had felt Mischa shut off her Gifts because she was his sister. That he could feel another Guide carving out his own hollowness ought to be impossible, but of all Sentinels, Hannibal knew that impossible was only the province of those with insufficient imagination.

“Hannibal.” The tremble in Chiyoh's voice pulled him out of his contemplations.

Sitting on the bench across from them was a jungle cat. It was possibly the most terrifyingly solid spirit animal that Hannibal had ever come across, and it was only a lifetime of experience that kept Hannibal's blood pressure from spiking at the presence of an apex predator sharing his space. Hannibal could handle the cat if it decided to attack him, but the flick of its tail and the wildness in its eyes told Hannibal that however that victory might come, the cat would make him pay for it in blood.

“It’s a panther.”

“There’s no such thing as a panther. It’s a jaguar.”

Both he and Chiyoh sat with their backs pressed to the seats behind them, neither willing to take their eyes off the creature in case it decided that was the moment to pounce.

“It’s black, Hannibal. Panthers are black.”

“That is a common misconception. What we consider panthers are either jaguars or leopards with a melanistic color variation that make them appear black. If you look hard you can still see the outline of spots.”

Cats did not smile. Hannibal didn’t care if they were spirit animals, cats did not smile. That flash of teeth had to be a suppressed snarl because a jaguar was not going to smirk at him. Absolutely not. Because the only reason the jaguar would smirk at him was because it was amused that Hannibal was so out of sorts as to ramble, and Hannibal Lecter did. not. ramble. (He didn’t even entertain the notion that the jaguar might be happy that Hannibal could correctly identify its species. He had the feeling that it preferred to be unknown.)

Hannibal cleared his throat and asked in all seriousness, “May we be of assistance?”

The jaguar licked its lips and turned its massive head to stare out the car’s window at the Centre where they had been too preoccupied to realize they had arrived. Hannibal spared the briefest possible glance for the building, still unwilling to tear his gaze away from this creature that he didn’t doubt would eat him alive if it felt even the slightest provocation. (And for some unknown reason, Hannibal suspected that this spirit animal greatly preferred when people made direct eye contact with it.)

That was when Hannibal saw it. He had been so concerned with not being one of those rare fools who managed to get themselves damaged by someone else’s spirit animal that he hadn’t noticed the way the cat’s short’s hairs were moving. Not with the subtleties of breath, but floating up and away from his flesh. The cat’s hairs ebbed and flowed with some current Hannibal barely felt brushing along the edges of his skin. But like sitting at the ocean’s edge at low tide, he could feel the touch coming closer and closer with every wave. By the time Hannibal realized it was water lapping at the edges of his soul, he was too deep under to bother pretending to care. It was the same chill as before, but now there was a comfort to it. That lovely certainty that he might be cold, but he was certainly not alone. The jaguar’s eyes were a shade of pale green that felt not unlike coming home, and Hannibal didn’t mind at all that the whole world was taking on that tint while the water lapped around his senses.

He felt some strange disturbance in the water, some echo working its way through the stillness and causing the slightest of ripples to disturb his peace. He could ignore it, he knew, outlast whatever it was troubling the water. The ripples grew around him, but the green was so pleasant that Hannibal just sank into the depths. Like Beowulf seeking Grendel’s mother, Hannibal plunged down into the cold water.

He swam for a time, deeper and deeper into the ocean. He felt teeth nipping at his toes, tentacles slip past his chest, and the unmistakable brush of scales rub along his arms. There

were creatures in the water with him, but there was something else too. Something they were all guarding, but it seemed they were willing to let Hannibal pass. At least, for the moment. Some grew more aggressive the deeper he went, but none of them did more than a particularly harsh jostle.

There were other things causing ripples in the surface up above him, and the creatures were furious about them all. A tentacle had whipped past him through the water, and moments later blood had floated down in a gentle cloud. Hannibal had stroked that particular tentacle. It deserved praise for such a valiant defense of the treasure below them. Hannibal needed no one to protect him, but the creatures would be a lovely guard for them both while they slept.

No.

Wait.

Hannibal didn't want to sleep.

Certainly not if that sleeping happened on anything that didn't have a high thread count.

It was perfectly peaceful down here, make no mistake, but one couldn't cook underwater, and while the sex would be interesting for a while, undoubtedly it would grow irksome to have nothing to use for leverage.

No, Hannibal would not be staying here in the deep and so he began swimming back towards the surface. Scales and tails began slipping past his skin as though the creatures wanted to be sure he was actually swimming the direction they thought he was. Then they began tugging him, gentle reminders that he was swimming the wrong way. The tugs grew harsher, tentacles wrapping around his ankles and yanking him back towards the deep. Hannibal was not so ill-bred as to kick out at the creatures but he twisted himself free from the grasp and kept swimming up towards the light.

Bare moments before he broke through the water's surface he could feel the waves crashing above him—a psionic disturbance trying to rile the water too much for his treasure to remain below. Whoever was causing the waves was a fool with no concept of how deep the water could be. Even Hannibal found the waves little more than an annoyance. Far more effective than the rabble, he could hear the echo of Chiyoh's shouts and feel the sting of her hand against his cheek where she'd tried to slap his consciousness back into his body. He was about to break through when he felt fingers wrap around his ankle.

Hovering beneath him, with the reflection of the water's surface dancing across his features, was an angel. Oh, The part of Hannibal that belonged out of the water recognized the man was William, but beneath the water he looked otherworldly, an Undine beckoning him back to the deep with green eyes the same haunting shade as his spirit animal's.

Never would Hannibal be certain if he could have followed William back to the depths, or if he would have pulled the man up with him to the sun. He liked to think that his willpower was unflinching, but William's eyes had a power in them that often shredded through Hannibal's will like paper and made him enjoy every moment of his fall.

But never would Hannibal know if this would have been the first in a long line of succumbing to William, or the last time he would ever refuse him. He would not know, because in that moment an interloper crashed through the water in a slicing dive. They made their way straight for William, and despite the creatures of the deep barreling up to protect their master, the person wrapped their arms around William and ripped him from the water like a cormorant snatching up their prey.

Hannibal watched his William be torn from the water's tender embrace, heard his scream echo through the silence, and began what would be a long history of abandoning his self-control when William gave the call.

With a blink, Hannibal found himself back in his own body. With another, he found himself in a sprint towards the Centre's front door, William's jaguar at one side, his own stag at the other, and Chiyoh behind them with her katana drawn.

XXXXXX

The Alpha Guide slammed Will out of his own head so fast he felt like he'd been smashed into a wall. Which wasn't entirely impossible since her bastard of a Sentinel may well have tried to beat Will back to consciousness.

The woman was braced over Will's lap, her thighs resting on top of his and her hands pressed to his temples so she could delve into his mind. "What was that?" she demanded without changing position.

Despite the pounding in his head, a fierce smile broke across Will's face. "You're in so much trouble." He said it in a sing-song tone that he knew made her want to slap him.

Before she could, one of the Sentinel secretaries burst into the room, breathless from fear rather than speed and declared, "The Ripper is here."

"Damn. Keep him—"

"Sir, there's won't be any keeping him anywhere. Sir." The man gulped. "He's feral."

Will didn't need to be an empath to feel the color drain out of the room. Will laughed. They were all such big talkers until they actually had to confront him. As pleasurable as it would have been under normal circumstances to watch the Sentinels all puff themselves up in feigned courage while in their hearts they panicked, Will could feel his spirit animal tearing up the stairs. If the man Will had seen in his depthless river stormed in and found everyone ready to attack, there'd be a hell of a lot of blood spilled, and none of it would be Will's. He supposed he ought to be perturbed by how little he cared at the possibility of all that violence, but frankly, Will had a massive predator representing his spirit for a reason. He was tempted to let his Sentinel tear his way through the whole room of interlopers, but that would mean more paperwork and more psychiatric visits, and Will just wasn't in the mood for that today.

“He’s not feral.” Will interrupted the man’s terrified ramble about the idiot Sentinels who were trying to get in the Ripper’s way. (“His animal caught all the tranquilizers in its chest and just shook them off!”)

“Attacking other Sentinels is the definition of feral!” The Alpha Guide snapped.

“No, it’s really not.”

“Will,” Jack scolded. “What did you do?”

“I just sat here, Jack. You’re the ones who decided to pick a fight with a Prime who specializes in killing people.”

“Hunting monsters is the preferred terminology for my profession.” And there he was. Will’s spirit animal sauntered across the room like the smug asshole he was, leaving Will’s Sentinel standing in the doorway, his head framed by the massive antlers of his own spirit animal standing behind him and guarding his back.

“Do you like to pretend you’re not killing people?” Will conveniently ignored how his animal bared its sharp, blood-dripping fangs at the Alpha Guide – who Will really was going to stop thinking of as Alpha any moment now; he knew what it meant to have that Sentinel with the ash-blond hair and the killer cheekbones be his Sentinel. The animal silently compelled her off his lap and took up the woman’s space like he was a kitten rather than bigger than Will.

“If I am willing to kill them, I don’t view them as people, I view them as pigs.” The Sentinel – Will didn’t feel right about calling him “The Ripper” now – watched their interaction with hungry and fascinated eyes, leaving his stag to intimidate the room’s Sentinel’s since the creature had blood dripping from its horns. (Will desperately wanted to know exactly how the animal could be insubstantial enough to run around the hallways and go through doors, but substantial enough to gore people. He also didn’t want to think too hard about the fact that his curiosity was scientific rather than for the well-being of his fellow Gifted.)

“Do they deserve to be considered pigs?”

“Yes.”

Jack stepped forward to throw himself into the middle of the conversation, but really, for such a smart man he didn’t seem to realize that Will had been keeping him distracted for the last ten minutes so Will could meet this man. He wasn’t going to let Jack playing politics get in the way. Instead of opening his mouth to lecture Will like he was a defiant teenager, Jack fell to the floor like his strings were cut.

“Did you kill him?” Will’s Sentinel asked.

“No. Would it bother you if I had?”

“Of course not. I would merely require some counsel on where you think the body ought to be disposed.”

The former Alpha stumbled back into her Sentinel's arms like he could do her any good. She threw up mental defenses around them both, to which Will's Sentinel merely cocked an eyebrow and drolled, "As the Alpha of the Washington DC area you have been party to the execution orders of several individuals, and ignored far worse travesties roaming around the minds of the politicians that you align yourself with to keep yourself in power. And the fact that I would dispose of a threat to my Guide is what you find horrifying?"

"Crawford wasn't a threat!" The Alpha Sentinel shouted, shoving his Guide behind him.

"He's centering his senses on my Guide. I imagine in the hope that my Guide would choose him out of inevitability."

"No Jack hasn't." Will objected, and his animal nipped at him in remonstrance. "He hasn't, Tramp!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Jack hasn't been centering on me, that would be too big of a risk for him in case I go off the deep end."

"He believes himself strong enough to keep you out of the deep -- fool that he is since the deep was lovely. And you are well aware that wasn't what I was asking."

Will flushed. "I liked Lady and the Tramp when I was a kid."

"But, Tramp?"

"Oh what, I suppose you named your stag after a king or something?"

"Cernunnos." The stag gave a polite little bow, its antlers coming perilously close to the former Alpha's head.

"You named your stage after the Celtic version of the devil?"

The Alpha guide squeaked again, and the Sentinel was starting to look a little pale. "It's far more complicated than that, William." Will shuddered at the sound of his name coming from his Sentinel's lips. Apparently, the lust he was giving off was enough that despite their terror for their lives, the two former Alphas blushed. "Ah, perhaps we ought to discuss our personal histories later, my William?"

"That would probably be best, Sentinel."

"Hannibal."

"Of course you are." Will deliberately denied his Sentinel the use of his own name in return. Not so much because he knew it would throw his Sentinel into a mating drive, but because he wanted to taunt him a little more.

"Perhaps later we could also have a discussion about your 'salt the earth' approach to mental health. I would appreciate it."

Will deliberately ignored the implication that taunting Hannibal wasn't in his best interest. "Hey, she wouldn't have been able to touch me if you hadn't lured me so close to the river's surface."

"That was meant to be a river?"

"What did you think it was?"

"An ocean!"

"Excuse me!" The Alpha interrupted.

"How terribly rude of us, I apologize for taking up so much of your time. William and I will see ourselves out."

"We will?"

"I have a house in Baltimore and I would rather not mate with you where these pathetic pigs can listen in."

Will snorted at the terror that broke across both of their faces at being categorized with Hannibal's victims. "Think you'll be able to last that long?"

"Yes, because you are going to behave yourself."

"That seems unlikely. I was just going to tell you that I've tested the soundproofing in this suite over the last few days and it's great." Hannibal's eye twitched. "Also, I have an open bottle of lube in my room."

Will was going to follow that up with mentioning that in an effort to make his confinement a bit more enjoyable, he'd spent a bit of last night fingering himself, but it turned out he didn't need to mention it. Hannibal certainly appreciated the preparation though.

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